

The Blind Leading The Blind

By CLARK REDFIELD

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SHARP HAD HAD one of the busier, more grinding days of his busy, grinding trade. He worked for a radio station, writing news, one of those stations whose broadcasts are always preceded by blaring musical fanfares and delivered, by those who read aloud what Sharp put on paper, in a tone close to a shout, no matter how big or little the news item might be.

The stories had come hard and fast that day, one on top of the other, the news editor grabbing the takes and ripping them out of the typewriters as fast as Sharp and the other writers could get the words down. The station had become what New York's afternoon newspapers had been when there were so many of them, and no radio or TV. Rush, rush, rush! Get it done, fast, and get it right the first time! What are we paying you for?

One of his last stories before he left his office that afternoon had been about a water main break that had shut down the BMT subway from 14th St. south far into Brooklyn. Where, of course, he was headed when he left, because he took the subway to the Brooklyn terminal of the Long Island Rail Road, which eventually led to home and peace, surcease from rush and deadline.

IRT IS FLOODED, TOO

His office was downtown, in the financial district. When he stepped into the street, he saw the brown, foul river gushing from the mouth of the BMT station and the men with the suctioning hoses working frantically to get the water out. The IRT line to Brooklyn was a block away and uphill and when he had left there had been no word that there was anything wrong with the IRT. He took that subway.

The IRT platform had a flood of its own. It was spilling over with confused people, refugees from the stricken BMT, who kept bumping into regular IRT users and asking if this train went to Brooklyn. Yes, it did; did you stay on for Atlantic Ave.; yes, you stayed on for Atlantic Ave.; did you stay on for Pacific St.; no you changed at Atlantic for Pacific St. He managed to get on a train that had some standing room.

Two miniskirted girls got on with him and as the car began to move, its lights dimmed and they saw something on the floor and one of them squealed in fright.

Sharp looked. Other men and women looked. On the floor, his head between his paws, its eyes wary, was a dog. The dog had its rear quarters next to a young woman's legs. Sharp looked at the woman and understood at once. So did other riders. A man next to him reached out and tapped the girl who had squealed.

"Miss, the lady is blind. That's her dog," the man said.

MOST RIDERS LEAVE TRAIN

"That's a seeing-eye dog. Haven't you ever seen a seeing-eye dog before?" Sharp said. People who panicked easily in situations like this always annoyed him. Some of his annoyance got into the tone of his voice; the girl looked back at him as though he were a masher, sniffed and began talking to her friend.

The train ground into the Brooklyn tunnel. People were trying to read their newspapers but the lights kept dimming and blinking and most of the riders gave up trying to read.

But the blind girl was reading a Braille book and she went on reading in the gloom, her fingers

gliding across the raised lines, fingers sensitive as a snake seeking prey in the grass; fingers that would stop, occasionally, perhaps at a difficult word or, as he noticed by watching her face, a phrase that touched her. Sometimes, when she paused, the flicker of a smile would cross the unseeing face. She read on and the train kept going.

At the Borough Hall station in Brooklyn, most of the riders, perhaps fearful of a total power failure farther down the line, got off. There was a seat clear, next to the blind girl. Sharp looked at one of the miniskirted girls and gestured toward the seat; the girl looked away. He took the seat.

The dog glanced up at him. It was not a shepherd, as those dogs usually were. It was black and shaggy and looked like an attenuated, black Irish wolfhound. Satisfied that Sharp meant no harm to its mistress, the dog rested its head between its paws again. But the animal kept looking up and around and, for a mad instant, Sharp wondered if the dog knew what stations they were passing and would nudge its mistress to get up at the right one.

The girl's reading fascinated Sharp. He had, like many news writers who were not hacks, sold short stories to magazines and some had been published in anthologies of Best Stories of the Year. He wondered, again madly, if she might be reading something of his.

The left hand held the upper corner of the page as the right glided over the Braille. The right hand would feel the bottom of the page, perhaps for a folio number, and when she turned the page the left hand would check the top of the next page before she read on.

The train ground on, past Hoyt St., where it faltered and the lights dimmed lower. Then it bucked and started again and rumbled into Nevins St., The stop before Atlantic. It went all the way into the station.

'SHE KNOWS THE WAY'

"Nevins Street," the car's P.A. system grated, and then the voice slowed down into a dying bass like a record running down on an old, spring-operated gramophone: "A-A-t-l-a-n-t-i-c n-e-e-ex . . ." and stopped, and there was a blinding blue-white flash and a noise like a clap of thunder after lightning and the train and the station were plunged into total, inky black.

A girl screamed.

A man shouted: "Stop that! Don't panic!"

"My God! Where are we?"

"Quiet! Don't panic!"

Sharp felt the dog rise. Seeking its mistress, its body touched Sharp's legs; the animal was trembling. People were rushing back and forth in the car, crashing into each other, falling, shouting, screaming.

"The doors are half open! We can get out!" a woman called from somewhere in the dark. Sharp felt concerned for the blind girl.

"Do you know where you are, miss?" he said touching her arm.

"Yes," she said, astonishingly calm in the maelstrom of fear about her. "Nevins St. This is where I get off."

"Can you get out of the station all right?"

"Of course," she said. "What's happening?"

And it came to him. Of course she couldn't know what had happened! The darkness meant nothing

to her. Everyone else in the car was blind but, being already blind, she was not.

"All the power's failed. We can't see our hands in front of our faces," Sharp said.

"I thought it might be something like that. She's scared," the girl said.

"She? Who?"

"My dog. She wants to lead me and now she can't," the girl said. "I only took her along today because I was going shopping in Manhattan and I didn't know the neighborhood."

Magically, at the sound of her voice, at what she was saying, the panic in the car was evaporating. They were all listening to her.

"Could you . . . could you lead us out, then?" Sharp said.

"Certainly," she said, getting up. "Here. Take my hand." He did so.

"Listen, everybody!" Sharp called out into the ink. "The blind lady is going to lead us out. She knows the way. I'll take her hand; somebody else take my hand and somebody else take

that person's hand and we'll get out of here."

There was some shuffling in the dark and then he felt a small, soft hand touch his. He held it firmly. "All right, miss?" Sharp said.

"Come on. Follow me," the blind girl said. "Look out for the door, and platform. There's a space you have to step over." They began leaving the car, a queer, midnight caravan of souls, the blind leading the blind.

The blind girl guided them to the platform and past the benches on it, slowly, carefully, passing warnings of what lay ahead via Sharp. "Here are the stairs. There are 14 of them. Then you turn right and there are 12 more. Then we turn to the right again," she would say. The line went through the station, up the stairs and finally got to the turnstiles.

"This is the exit," she said. She went through and Sharp went through, feeling the turnstile strike his legs and give. Now there was a dim light from above; the last stairway, to the street.

People going by on the street

above stopped and watched openmouthed as the strange line came out, led by a girl with a dog. Finally, they were all out. Cops were rushing up from everywhere.

After the nothingness of the hole below the street, the daylight was dazzling. Sharp found that the other hand holding his was attached to one of the miniskirted girls, the one who had looked insulted when he had told her the girl was blind.

The miniskirted girl smiled at him. "Thanks, mister," she said.

"Don't thank me. Thank her," Sharp said. He turned. "Are you all right . . ." but the blind girl and her dog had vanished into the crowd. Now, why had he let her do that? This was a hell of a story. And he didn't have her name! He ran to a phone booth and called the radio station.

Sure enough, the news editor agreed that it was a good story. And sure enough, he bawled Sharp out for not getting the blind girl's name; what kind of a reporter was he, anyway?

THE END